

Federal cash to widen I-10, I-17

State decides how \$350 mil for highways will be spent

by **Ronald J. Hansen** - Mar. 4, 2009
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Congested stretches of four highways in Maricopa County will get an extra lane, using money from President Barack Obama's \$787 billion stimulus package.

Adding lanes to Interstates 10 and 17 are at the top of the county's list of priority projects unanimously approved Tuesday by the State Transportation Board. The county's \$129 million spending plan primarily targets existing roads in the West Valley.

Some officials in the county were disappointed that they didn't get more than 37 percent of the state's \$350 million share of the highway-stimulus dollars. Officials in rural Arizona were thrilled with the \$175 million that will be divided among 13 counties. Pima County will get \$45 million, or 13 percent of the funds. The money was allocated according to the state's decades-old funding formula, though Maricopa County officials had urged the state to use a different approach more reflective of the economic downturn.

All the projects are expected to create extra work for an estimated 17,000 construction workers, who have been hit hard by the economic crisis and the slowdown in building projects.

"You ought to put the money where the job loss is," said Eric Anderson, transportation director for the Maricopa Association of Governments. He said the county accounts for 60 percent of the state's population and 78 percent of the construction jobs lost in the recession. Maricopa County also saw a number of projects canceled in January, a victim of state budget cuts.

But a dozen people from Arizona's rural corners praised the board for putting resources where overall unemployment is high and where most of the roads are.

"We're not asking for anything unreasonable, but we are asking for our fair share," said Chris Bridges, a transportation planner for Yavapai County.

Yuma Mayor Larry Nelson initially thanked the board for showing "backbone" and said, "There are some important things that go on outside Maricopa."

But later, when he learned the Arizona Department of Transportation plans just one \$11.5 million project in his county, Nelson told the board that he was "extremely disappointed."

In Maricopa County, besides an estimated \$65 million of interstate projects, the plan also calls for two road-widening projects along U.S. 60 estimated at \$55 million. There is also a \$9 million project to widen Loop 101 between Beardsley and Union Hills roads.

Overall, the board's plans would spend 55 percent of the state's stimulus funds on new roads, 29 percent on preserving existing roads and the rest on replacements.

While the final statewide project list could change by March 13 to comply with rules outlined in the \$787 billion stimulus law, officials seemed confident Maricopa County's would not.

In making its decisions, the board also had to give priority to "economically distressed areas" as outlined by the Federal Highway Administration.

The designation applies to low-income, high-unemployment areas and fits all but three Arizona counties: Maricopa, Pima and Coconino. But the projects within Maricopa County are largely in the West Valley, the area hardest hit by foreclosures, said John Halikowski, ADOT's interim director.

Under the plans approved Tuesday, each region also has a list of projects prioritized if there is any money left. ADOT won't seek bids on the approved projects until after the plans are finalized March 13. The agency has said it hopes to begin construction near the end of May.

The one-time bulge in highway funds under the stimulus represents roughly an entire year of extra cash in Arizona. And all the projects picked Tuesday would have waited at least another budget year if not for the stimulus.

Speaking at the U.S. Department of Transportation in Washington, President Barack Obama again touted the importance of infrastructure spending.

"Transportation projects that were once on hold are now starting up again as part of the largest new investment in America's infrastructure since President Eisenhower built the interstate-highway system," Obama said Tuesday.

He predicted more than 200 highway-construction projects will begin in the coming weeks and said the stimulus will save or create 150,000 jobs in that industry. That total is greater than the number of jobs lost by Ford, Chrysler and General Motors combined over the past three years, Obama said.

Overall, he expects 400,000 people working in infrastructure-related jobs as part of the stimulus, which he has said will save or create 3.5 million jobs.